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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, FEBRUARY 25 - March 7, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

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True Ak Zhol Changes Name, Shuffles Leadership  
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¶2. Opposition party True Ak Zhol held its fourth party congress in Almaty on February 29. Congress delegates voted to change True Ak Zhol's name to Azat (i.e., "free" in Kazakh), in order to better distinguish the party from rival Ak Zhol. Bulat Abilov was elected chairman of the renamed party, and Tulegen Zhukeyev was selected to be general secretary. Oraz Zhandosov will remain in the party, but, as expected, will no longer hold a leadership position. (Note: Prior to the party congress, Abilov, Zhukeyev, and Zhandosov were co-chairmen of True Ak Zhol. End Note.)

¶3. The Azat civic movement, a Kazakh nationalist group, plans to challenge True Ak Zhol's new name, Khasen Kozha-Akhmet, the leader of the organization, announced at a press conference in Almaty on March 4. According to Kozha-Akhmet, Azat civic movement activists interpreted True Ak Zhol's move as an attempt to steal their own popular name. The Azat civic movement was established in 1990 and re-registered in 2001. Kozha-Akhmet cited Article 18 of the Law on Public Associations, which does not permit two public associations to have identical names. On these grounds, the Azat civic movement is filing a complaint with the Ministry of Justice. Should the Ministry ignore the complaint, the Azat civic movement will file suit in court against Bulat Abilov and his associates.

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Abilov Ready For Dialogue With The Authorities?  
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¶4. "Many individuals in the Ak Orda [i.e., the Presidential Administration] and outside of it want to portray me as the President Nazarbayev's enemy, but I am not, we just have different views," opposition leader Bulat Abilov stated in an interview with the Vremya daily on March 6. Abilov indicated that he is ready for dialogue with the government. "And it looks like the Ak Orda has begun to understand this," he explained. Abilov cited the recent appointment of Kairat Keimbetov to be head of the Presidential Administration as evidence of progress. Abilov described Kelimbetov as a "person of democratic beliefs," who will say the right things to Nazarbayev.

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Protest Against Shopping Mall Construction  
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15. TV Channel 31 reported that on March 1 in Almaty, approximately 20 activists from the Azat (formerly True Ak Zhol) party and the Shanyrak civic movement held a demonstration on Almaty's Republic Square to protest against a new shopping mall that the city administration had started constructing under the square. The protesters contended that it is inappropriate to build a shopping mall on a site where two decades earlier a "popular uprising for independence" took place. (Note: In December 1986, there were mass protests on the square by Kazakh youth in response to the removal of Kazakhstan's ethnic-Kazakh Communist Party First Secretary and his replacement by an ethnic Russian. The protests were violently broken up by the Soviet authorities, reportedly resulting in several hundred deaths throughout Almaty. End Note.) The police detained eight protestors and held them at a local police station for four hours. The following day, three demonstrators were fined and one received a warning. The city administration had issued a permit for the demonstration -- but on the basis that it be held at a location on the outskirts of the city.

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Karasu Residents Defend Their Homes  
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16. According to [www.zonakz.net](http://www.zonakz.net), on February 21, residents of Karasu village outside of Almaty blocked local authorities from demolishing 13 of their homes. Approximately 40 court officials and policemen accompanied a demolition team which was prepared to bulldoze the houses. Local residents learned about the plans in advance and invited activists from the Shanyrak civic movement, residents of other locales victimized by demolitions, and media representatives to assist them in preventing the demolitions. With the local residents armed with stones and bottles, the demolition team was forced to withdraw. The residents now plan to appeal the results of an auction in which their houses and land had been sold to a little

ASTANA 00000498 002 OF 002

known company at a rock-bottom price.

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Underground Casinos in Almaty  
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17. Almaty municipal police closed yet another underground casino on February 29. This was the tenth illegal casino discovered by police since the beginning of the year.

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